

March of Dimes

# Folic Acid

## A Vitamin to Help

## Prevent Birth Defects



### What Is Folic Acid?

It's a B vitamin that women should take every day if they might become pregnant.

### Why Should I Take It?

Folic acid may help reduce the risk of having a baby with certain birth defects of the brain and spinal cord. It's most important to have enough folic acid in your system right before and early in pregnancy. So, if you start now to take it every day, you'll have the amount you need should you become pregnant. Remember, most pregnancies are unplanned.

### How Much Folic Acid Do I Need?

The recommended daily intake is 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. You should not take more than 1,000 micrograms unless your health care provider recommends it.



# “B” Get the Attitude

**That's “B” for the B vitamin folic acid.**

Get the attitude by taking it every day. Folic acid may help save your baby from birth defects of the brain and spinal cord. But you have to take it every day before you get pregnant and in the first few weeks of your pregnancy for it to help.

**B vitamin** folic acid ... Why you need it

A baby needs folic acid right after it's conceived, before you even know you're pregnant.

Folic acid helps the baby's brain and spinal cord develop properly. Without enough, the baby could have serious birth defects called neural tube defects.



March  
of Dimes  
*Putting babies together*

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## Where Do I Get Folic Acid?

The March of Dimes recommends that you eat a healthy diet, including foods rich in folic acid, and take a multivitamin every day. **This is the only sure way to get all the folic acid and other vitamins and minerals you need.**

Foods that contain natural folic acid include orange juice, green leafy vegetables and beans. Fortified breakfast cereals, enriched grain products, and vitamins contain a synthetic form of folic acid. It is more easily absorbed by your body than the natural form.

## What Else Can I Do to Ensure a Healthy Baby?

Think ahead. See your doctor or health care provider for a pre-pregnancy checkup. Adopt healthy behaviors before you become pregnant. For more information, contact the March of Dimes Resource Center toll-free, 888-MODIMES, or by e-mail, at [resourcecenter@modimes.org](mailto:resourcecenter@modimes.org). You also can visit our Home Page, <http://www.modimes.org>.



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### Be informed

What are neural tube defects? About 2,500 babies are born with neural tube defects each year. They include spina bifida, which could mean the baby will never be able to walk; and anencephaly, which means the baby's brain and skull don't develop fully and the baby dies.

Research shows that, if all women in the United States took enough folic acid every day throughout their child-bearing years, up to 70 percent of these birth defects could be prevented. The key is to take folic acid before getting pregnant.

### Both of you need it

Folic acid's good for your health, too. Some studies suggest it may help fight heart disease, and colon and cervical cancers.

### Best ways to get it

You need to get 400 micrograms (0.4 milligram)\* of folic acid every day. The best way to get it is to take a multivitamin every day and eat a healthy diet. Foods rich in folic acid include fortified breakfast cereals, orange juice and leafy green vegetables.

### Begin right now

Because folic acid is so important, you should begin taking it right away. If you need help remembering to take a vitamin every day, try to connect it with something you already do each day.

Start taking your multivitamin at the same time as you:

- brush your teeth
- put on your perfume
- feed the cat
- make coffee
- put in or take out your contacts
- drink your orange juice
- eat lunch
- listen to the news.

It won't be long before you don't even have to think about it anymore.

### Get the "B" attitude

Take folic acid today and every day. For your baby's health and for yours.

\* Because some women may need more folic acid, the March of Dimes recommends that all women see their doctors before pregnancy. If you have diabetes, epilepsy or a family history of neural tube defects, talk to your doctor about folic acid before you plan for your next baby.



### FOLIC ACID NOW

### QUESTIONS?

Call: 888-MODIMES

Visit: [www.modimes.org](http://www.modimes.org)

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# Why Folic Acid Is So Important

Folic acid is a B vitamin that can be found in some enriched foods and vitamin pills.

If women have enough of it in their bodies before pregnancy, this vitamin can prevent birth defects of the baby's brain or spine. Spina bifida, a birth defect of the spine, can



cause paralysis of the lower body, with no control of bowel or bladder, and learning disabilities.

Another type of birth defect affects the brain and causes babies to die within a few days.

But now the message about these birth defects is one of hope—many of them can be prevented if women get enough folic acid every day.

Folic acid can help form a baby's brain and spine. Getting enough takes a small effort. But it makes a big difference.

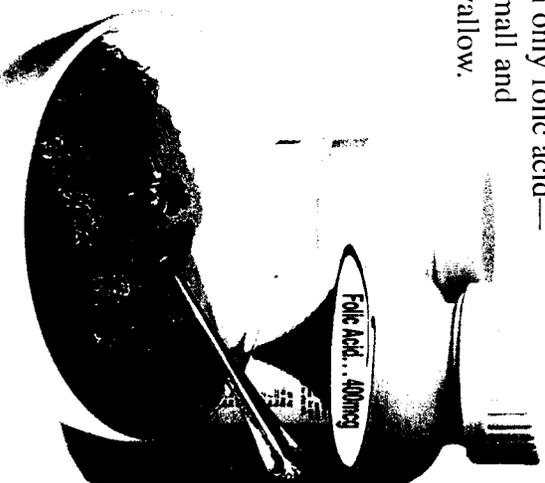
## Eat Right...

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Most of us get some folic acid in our diet every day. Folic acid has been added to some foods such as enriched breads, pastas, rice, and cereals. Check the labels on your breakfast cereals; a few have 100 percent of the folic acid you need. A well-balanced diet with fruits and vegetables is always important. You can get your folic acid through food alone, but it takes careful planning to make sure you get enough every day.

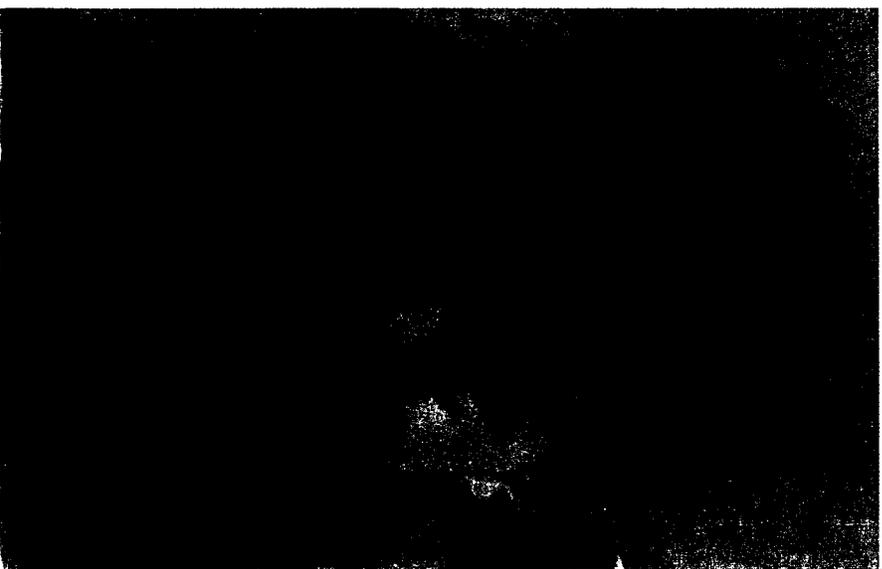
## ...and Take a Vitamin

For many women, an easy way to be sure you're getting enough folic acid is to take a vitamin with folic acid in it. Almost every multivitamin you can buy has all the folic acid you need. If you get an upset stomach from multivitamins, try taking them with meals or just before bed. You can also buy vitamin pills made with only folic acid—they are small and easy to swallow.



## Even If You're Not Planning To Have a Baby Yet

No one expects an unplanned pregnancy. But they happen — every day. In fact, about half of all pregnancies are not planned. That's why you should get enough folic acid every day if there's any chance you could get pregnant. Because by the time you know you're pregnant, your baby's brain and spine are already formed.



## What are Birth Defects?

Birth defects are abnormal conditions that happen before or at the time of birth. Some are mild – like an extra finger or toe. Some are very serious – like a heart defect. They can



cause physical, mental, or medical problems. Some, like Down syndrome or sickle cell anemia, are caused by genetic factors. Others are caused by certain drugs, medicines or chemicals. The causes of most birth defects are still a mystery. Researchers are working hard to learn the causes of birth defects so that we can find ways to prevent them.

### Did You Know?

- Birth defects are the leading cause of death in children less than one year of age – causing one in every five deaths.
- 18 babies die each day in the U.S. as the result of a birth defect.
- Defects of the heart and limbs are the most common kinds of birth defects.
- Millions of dollars are spent every year for the care and treatment of children with birth defects.

## How Serious are Birth Defects?

Birth defects are a serious problem. One in 33 babies is born with a birth defect. Many people believe that birth defects only happen to other people. Birth defects **can** and **do** happen in any family. About 150,000 babies in the U.S. each year have birth defects.



## What is the Good News?

The *good news* is that new ways of preventing and treating birth defects are being found.

Genes that may cause birth defects are being found every day, providing hope for new treatments and cures. Genetic counseling can provide parents with information about their risks based on family history, age, ethnic or racial background, or other factors.

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Better health care for mothers with problems like diabetes or seizures can improve their chances of having healthy babies. Immunization prevents infections like German measles (rubella) that can harm unborn babies.

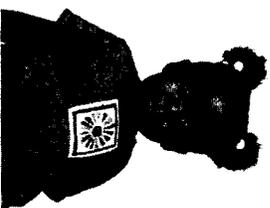


### Did You Know?

All women who could get pregnant should get 400 micrograms (400 mcg or 0.4 mg) of folic acid every day to help prevent some types of serious birth defects. Folic acid is a B-vitamin that can reduce the risk of birth defects of the brain and spine.

Today, babies born with birth defects can live longer and healthier lives. Special care after birth and newborn screening tests can help these babies.

Many states keep track of how often and where birth defects happen. Your state may be able to tell you about birth defects and services that may help you or someone you know.



## **What Steps Can Women Take For Healthier Babies?**

Not all birth defects can be prevented. But a woman can increase her own chance of having a healthy baby. Many birth defects happen very early in pregnancy, sometimes before a woman even knows she is pregnant.

Remember that about half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Therefore, every woman should:

- ☺ Take a vitamin that has folic acid in it every day.
- ☺ Have regular medical check-ups.
- ☺ Talk to her health care provider about any medical problems and medicine use (both over-the-counter and prescription). Ask about avoiding any substances at work or at home that might be harmful to a developing baby.
- ☺ Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- ☺ Avoid eating raw or undercooked meat.
- ☺ Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and street drugs.

### **While pregnant:**

- ☺ Keep up these healthy habits.
- ☺ Get early prenatal care and go to every appointment.
- ☺ Avoid using hot tubs and saunas.
- ☺ Have x-rays done only if necessary.

## **Want to Know More?**

- Ask your health care provider or local health department how to plan for a healthy baby.
- Call the March of Dimes Resource Center at 1-888-663-4637 (toll-free), or visit: <http://www.modimes.org>
- Call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at 1-888-232-6789 (toll-free), e-mail [flo@cdc.gov](mailto:flo@cdc.gov), or visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/prevent/flo>
- Call the Birth Defects Registry or Genetics Program at your state health department.

The National Birth Defects Prevention Network (NBDPN) is a national network of individuals working at local, state, and national levels in birth defects surveillance, research, and prevention.

[www.nbdpn.org/NBDPN](http://www.nbdpn.org/NBDPN)

## **Important Information About...**



# **Preventing Birth Defects**

